



**MAY 1987**

When Nana Kutumela wrote this, the notion of Hillbrow – Johannesburg’s liveliest and most vibrant suburb – as a symbol of hope was bold. Nowadays, people would either laugh or cry. Hillbrow is a principal victim of the decay cycle that sets in when flatland (in South Africa, what AmerCanadese calls “apartments” are known as “flats”) changes markets. For thirty years Joe Buzhwa the bank clerk has been neat and tidy and has watered the window boxes at 25 Buckingham Mansions (SA flats are usually Mansions with Britishly royal-sounding names). Joe goes off to the old-age home. The new tenant sub-lets the flat to 19 job-seekers from the countryside and/or continent at large. The plumbing conks under the strain, the tenant withholds rent, the landlord withholds services, the streets get filthy... Nonetheless, Hillbrow is full of volunteer NGOs and people who inject energy and resources into making things work. It’s possible that Nana’s 1980s optimism was well founded after all; just a bit interrupted.

# The other side of Hillbrow

*Daily, we hear more about the horrors of Hillbrow. But is it really as bad as people say? Nope, says Nana Kutumela, here is the South Africa of the future – and it doesn't look too bad at all.*

**C**olour me black, colour me pink, colour me whatever you like, but, please, just leave me in peace to enjoy the splendour and dignity of living in Hillbrow. Yes, the splendour and the dignity. I do not deny that there are problems. But the problems are not the whole story of Hillbrow.

To we who live there, unlike you who rely on the scandal and horror stories of the newspapers, there is another side. There is the splendour of cosmopolitanism. And there is the dignity of being able to stroll the street of one's neighbourhood freely and proudly at any time of day or night, with the whole world around you and no fears of passes or curfews.

Let me and my fellow “greys” continue to live our colourless existence. Let

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the government arrest the political stuntmen who are inciting conflict and disturbance in Hillbrow, instead of arresting us peaceful citizens who are reveling in the rich and full life which Hillbrow gives us.

Where else in South Africa can people of any complexion walk arm in arm with whomever they wish, without inhibition? Where else have people outgrown the silly skin issue? Is this not civilisation?

Where else are people free of the shopping hours” panic? Where else are supermarkets open from Sunday to Sunday, and chemists and cafes and restaurants open for 24 hours? Where else can you take a late-night stroll through busy streets, and browse in high-class record shops and book stores? Where else is there such life and soul? Such areas one only reads about in overseas magazines and sees in movies. Now it is a reality in South Africa. Why disturb it?

Now the buzz is that the government will accept that they cannot get rid of the blacks in Hillbrow, and will get rid of the whites instead. Why doesn't the government just live and let live? If it is worried about crime, let it deal with crime. If it is worried about drugs, let it deal with drugs. But let it not worry about "race". "Race" is no problem in Hillbrow.

Of the many problems, the biggest is mugging. Usually the muggers are black and often the victims are white. So the impression is created that mugging is a result of having blacks in the area. What is interesting, is that everybody forgets about white muggers and also about black victims. At any rate it is not surprising that usually there is a racial factor. The whites have brought it upon themselves. Blacks have had to live from hand to mouth while the whites have arranged it so that they skate on butter and swim in milk and honey. If you were a mugger, who would you pick on? Would you pick on a black victim, where the chances are that his or her wallet will be full of Letters of Demand, or on a white one where you have a good chance that there will be banknotes inside?

The big need is to realise that mugging is a problem to be dealt with on its own. It is not to be tied to race. My neighbours know that I am not going to mug them. They know that if I have a male friend visiting me he is not going

to mug them either. They know that he would no more mug them than their dominee would mug them. If they are mugged by some black guy they do not blame me for it.

In Hillbrow there are many cultural adaptations which have to be made. I find that my heart sinks when some foreigners move in nearby. I expect that I will be hearing German or Italian voices halfway through the night, and strange music and the smells of strange food. But I am learning to tolerate this. I suppose that my food and voices and smells are strange to them too. We have to tolerate. Even more, we have to learn to feel good about tolerating.

One white lady in Abel Road has blacks all around her. She says she only objects to one thing. She cannot stand the “primitive” habit of her neighbours of sitting on the balconies and eating from one pot. “It puts me off,” she says “they go on like pigs”. I say to her that to some people it is selfish and stuck-up to eat from separate plates. As it is difficult for man and woman to merge into one as husband and wife, so is it difficult for races to live together. Somewhere down the line there has to be flexible interpretation of what is good standards. Some people think it is wrong to eat with your hands and other people think it is wrong to eat with items which you take out of a drawer. We have to learn to tolerate.

For me, I have had the experience of ‘Living with whites in their own countries and I have learned that whites value their privacy. This is in contrast to the black habit of taking an interest in neighbours’ lives, even if it sometimes intrudes on their privacy.

In Hillbrow I have to understand both patterns. What I wonder is: who has the correct measuring stick? Is there a correct measuring stick? One thing that bothers me is the “corridor friendship”. I find that the whites chat to me in the corridors and the next thing they bolt up their doors. They don’t understand: why can’t people feel free to come into a neighbour’s house when they are lonely? The irony is that most flat dwellers, of any age or race, are singles, and their common problem is loneliness. But at least we are corridor friends, which is better than not friends at all.

Most of the whites are pensioners, particularly the South African whites.

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Hillbrow consists of three kinds of people - the old pensioners, who are South African and mainly Afrikaans; the blacks, who may be young or old or rich or poor or anything, all that they have in common is that they could not find accommodation in the townships; and the foreigners.

Some of the pensioners find great enjoyment in the way the blacks conduct their lives. One says to me that he has at last found friends. "The blacks talk to me. We discuss everything including our personal problems. We watch television together."

Apart from muggings, the pensioners do not have problems. And the blacks do not have problems with the pensioners. The foreigners are a different matter. Many of them brandish guns at random. Many of them are neurotic about the blacks, even the same people who are the main clients of the black prostitutes who doll up in weird outfits and tarmac down Kotze Street wiggling their bottoms.

Recently a watchman was shot by a foreigner, who thought he was about to attack him. What worries blacks is that there have been numerous cases where the defendant gets away with a fine or a light sentence.

There are also some young white South Africans. I have a neighbour who is a white girl from Pretoria. She says: "I must admit everything is different here. People are warm. No-one cares about who people hold hands with."

A big problem is the attitude of blacks in the townships. They look upon the people who live in town as harlots and homosexuals. It is true that many black prostitutes have come to town, where business is better and the clients are richer. It is also true that many homosexuals have come to town and especially to Hillbrow. You cannot blame them. In the townships a homosexual is a leper. They live like fugitives, whereas in Hillbrow they can sit openly, even in a restaurant, and nobody worries.

The town people do not always help. Some think it is prestigious to have white neighbours and they look upon township folk as third-grade citizens. We have a class difference between town people and township people, with each looking down on the other.

Much as I enjoy Hillbrow I would return to the township should I get a

house. Apart from the deadly dullness of the townships at night, where the only entertainment is a few nightclubs which are difficult to reach and a million shebeens where menfolk are drunk and coarse and a woman cannot go, there is also the political feuding which has claimed many lives and made much misery.

Now in Hillbrow there is concern among many people because political refugees are flooding in. Some people claim that only the UDF people are taking sanctuary in town but this is not so, there are Azapo people too. What if they should continue their war here? Many people are worried that they may be hit by a stray bullet in the black political war but to me this is not a big problem.

There have been no ugly incidents so far and I cannot see that gang fights can take place under the police's eye in town. Especially not lately, when we are even getting used to seeing Casspirs and Hippos around Hillbrow. That is something that a year ago we would never have believed! What we are not sure of is why they are here. Are they following my black skin or is there something else?

The other problem is that some landlords take advantage of blacks. They charge "service fees" for getting flats for blacks, and the rent margin is not funny at all. In some cases blacks can be paying R235 for a bachelor flat where the white person next door is paying R140, but they cannot complain because they are illegal. Sometimes also the blacks will paint and repair flats, for which there is no reimbursement and no security of tenure. And there are times where you will find seven black people living in one single bachelor flat.

But at the same time looking for a flat in Hillbrow will often show you the best side of human nature. I was helped by one caretaker who had no place available herself but spent time and trouble phoning her friends to look for a place for me.

In the end one wonders what is the hullabaloo about? People in Hillbrow are learning to live in the kind of South Africa which the rest of the country ha! still to discover, with all its pains as well as all its joys.